Is Deceitful Language Really Deceitful?

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I explain how language is an important aspect in advertising. Many advertisers use weasel words and double speak as tactics in making the consumer assume something about their product that really is not true. I reviewed and incorporated different articles that had different views about the tactics, and specific tactics that advertisers use, including neuromarketing.

Key Words: Advertising, Weasel Words, Double Speak, Morals, Ethics, Neuromarketing

Is Deceitful Language Really Deceitful?

Everyday, people are faced with hundreds to thousands of sensory stimuli, including advertising. Whether or not we know it, advertising is still making its way into our mind regardless of if we even pay attention to it. Language is especially critical in advertising; it shapes and impacts our everyday lives. Language can often be the backbone of many different cultures, as well as our basic way of communication. Language in advertising has found its way to the forefront in that in many cases, the language used by advertisers is often controversial and deceitful, with specific types of industries such as makeup and exercise equipment or supplements. This, in turn, leads to the question, is it moral or ethical to use deceitful language in advertising?

Imagine walking down the makeup aisle of a store. You see an advertisement for a mascara brand claiming to make your lashes 100% more volumized – upon closer inspection of the ad, you see that it states “Model is wearing lash inserts”. How then is it possible to claim that the mascara makes your lashes 100% more volumized? This ad, like many others, uses deceitful language in order to try to persuade a customer to buy it. The goal of beauty product advertising is to create a sense of want and need in the consumer so that by buying the products, they will in turn look like the models in the ads, however slim the chances of looking like the model actually may be. The language often used in beauty advertisements includes phrases such as “clinically proven”, “dermatologist recommended”, and other phrases that assume great performance of the product (Zoldan, 2015, para. 1) A study was done about the cosmetic industry and how many of their ads make the products seem better than they actually are. Based on an article written about the study from TIME Magazine, “Only 18% of all claims made in commercials for cosmetics are generally trustworthy…The study authors conclude that claims of “well-being and happiness” are usually not substantiated. “Those who back the claims with scientific evidence and consumer testing often use questionable methodologies for their substantiation”” (Sifferlin, 2015, para. 1). This proves that companies try to enhance the sales of their products by using phrases that will act as though the company has done scientific research or found something groundbreaking to put into their products.

Morals and ethics come into play when discussing the language of advertisements because are people really getting what the products seem to claim? The answer is no. Although many people believe that ads are claiming something, they are not. William Lutz, author of “Weasel Words: The Art of Saying Nothing at All”, shows that weasel words, as well as doublespeak, is prominent in advertising. “It refers to speech or writing that presents two or more contradictory ideas in such a way that an unsuspecting audience is not consciously aware of the contradiction and is likely to be deceived” (p. 415). Weasel words are common in advertising because they provide a way of making a statement without actually stating anything. Typical weasel words include “help”, “fast”, “new and improved”, and “like” (Lutz, p. 416-420). These are all words that can imply things, but do nothing more. The reason why weasel words work in ads is because of the claim that comes after them. “The trick is that the claim that comes after the weasel word is usually so strong and so dramatic that you forget the word “help” and concentrate only on the dramatic claim. You read into the ad a message that the ad does not contain” (Lutz, p. 416). This is the loophole for advertisers; if the so-called “magic” of the product does not work for the consumer, then the advertisers are not at fault because the consumer is the one that made those assumptions about the product in the first place based on the claim. In reality, the claim that includes the weasel words does not actually claim anything. Ethics and morals can be discussed when thinking about how advertisers use language because although the language they use could be ethical to them and their business, it may not necessarily be ethical or moral to the consumer. The definition of moral is “of, relating to, or concerned with the principles or rules of right conduct of the distinction between right and wrong; ethical” (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2010). The goal of a business using advertising is to create conversation about their product and ultimately sell it. Good businesses try to use ethics when creating and selling their products. In an article in U.S. News & World Report, the author stated that “The company may have a small study or rely on some science, but the claims are so greatly exaggerated beyond what the product can actually do” (Kossman, 2013, para. 1). Although using deceitful language and weasel words may not be ethical to the consumer, it is ultimately up to the consumer to do research on the products they want to buy, and decide for themselves whether or not the ads are really claiming something to be true.

The article, “Truth in the Meaning of Advertisements”, explains how there are two main views of consumer responses to ads: The Information Approach and the Meaning Approach. “The traditional information processing perspective has construed ads as essentially composed of adjustable product-related cues which act upon passive consumers” (Meline, 1996, para. 7). This approach utilizes prior knowledge, motivation, opportunity, and ability. Based on the article, this information is known as “peripheral content” for the consumer, which means the amount of advertising processing that the consumer does when faced with an ad. The second approach is the Meaning Approach which examines “advertising as meaning”. “The focus suggested by these researchers and others is on the meaning of advertisements construed by the individual. This emerging stream of research has emphasized that a consumer actively assigns meaning to advertising cues rather than simply drawing information from the ad” (Meline, 1996, para. 10). This approach takes into account how individuals respond to an ad based on social and cultural contexts and backgrounds, which are typically similar for many people in that similar life experiences may have been shared among people. “The meaning approach has also emphasized the multidimensionality of meaning. In this view, consumers construct multiple meanings for advertisements…In this respect, as consumers continue to process an ad new meanings are likely to be developed, some meanings may be more important than others and changes in meaning may occur” (Meline, 1996, para. 12). Consumers can find different meanings in advertisements, and make connections with the information that most suits their lifestyle. There are typical marketing strategies known and consumers may sometimes apply those strategies to the advertisements that they see and find a meaning because of it. “For example, a consumer watching a commercial for an exercise machine which shows an extremely fit model working out may form intended meaning of “This machine will help me get in shape like that person.” Assuming that getting in shape is a goal of this consumer, the correspondence between meaning and goal would be high. However, the same consumer may also construct the unintended meaning of “This ad is trying to mislead me by using sex appeal.” The fit between this meaning and the individual’s knowledge of appropriate marketing tactics would be low since deception is not a desirable characteristic of advertisers for most consumers” (Meline, 1996, para. 16-17). If advertisers try to market their products with knowledge of the two main consumer responses to ads, they may be able to create less thoughts in consumers that all ads are simply the same.

A recent topic that has emerged regarding advertising includes a type of marketing known as “Neuromarketing”, which uses “techniques from neuroscience to analyze people’s responses to products and promotions” (Singer, 2010, para. 2). Being that advertising tends to impact a person’s subconscious, neuromarketers claim that “traditional market research methods - like consumer surveys and focus groups - are inherently inaccurate because the participants can never articulate the unconscious impressions that whet their appetites for certain products” (Singer, 2010, para. 3). It is known that advertising impacts consumers’ subconscious; although consumers may not be watching an ad on TV, that does not mean that they don’t hear it, or that they will not make a reference to that ad in the future. Because consumers have somewhat become attuned to marketing techniques, some businesses are trying to acquire neuromarketing techniques in order to break through that barrier between the consumers conscious and subconscious. Although this tactic may be positive for advertisers and businesses in that they are trying to reach a person’s subconscious to influence a purchase, many people view it as a brainwashing tactic without knowing all of the information. “Neuromarketing may distinguish whether a person’s emotional response is positive or negative, but not whether the positive response is in awe or amusement” (Singer, 2010, para. 12). There is more research being done about neuromarketing and how businesses can implement it without making the consumer believe that they are being unconsciously forced into buying a product.

Advertising is full of words, from weasel words to catchy slogans to what the commentator is saying in the ad, language is especially important in advertising. It does seem deceitful with the way advertisers place their words, positioning them in a way that consumers think they are getting something more than they actually are. However, if a person were to look up the words that are in the ad, they would realize that the ad is really claiming nothing, and it is ultimately up to the consumer to do research and find out if the product is right for them. There are many different products that tend to not turn out as advertised. Many advertising techniques exist and it is becoming more apparent that consumers are aware of these tactics. Language is one of the most prominent aspects of human culture and it should not be used in a deceitful way by advertisers in order to sell their product.